

Guyana Leader Set to Take New Term After a Vote Denounced as Flawed

Electoral officials appear ready to give its president, David E. Granger, another term and control over the country's new oil riches. Observers cry foul.

By Anatoly Kurmanaev

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Guyana's electoral authorities set the stage for the re-election of the country's president late Friday, when they declared the country's ruling party the winner of the capital region, in a widely denounced process that threatens to isolate the small South American nation and new oil producer.

"A president sworn in on the basis of those results will not be considered legitimate," the American, Canadian, British and European Union embassies said Friday in a joint statement.

Guyana in January began to export the first trickle of the massive crude reserves discovered off its coast, a move that is expected to transform the poor former British sugar colony into a petrostate in the coming years. A new term would give the president, David E. Granger, power to manage proceeds from those exports.

However, the flawed vote signals for many Guyanese a return to the political malaise of the 1980s, when the predecessor of Mr. Granger's party ruled the country through a series of sham elections and with the support of the army.

The Western embassies joined four international observer missions in accusing Guyana's electoral officials of subverting the vote count after the March 2 general elections. They claim the results from the capital, Georgetown, were tabulated in an opaque way and don't match the numbers from the polling stations.

The announcement of the results also violated Wednesday's ruling by Guyana's top judge, who ordered the electoral commission to change the vote counting process to comply with the law.

“Democratic nations can’t ignore this blatant disregard for rule of law,” the State Department’s top Latin America official, Michael G. Kozak, said on Twitter Friday. “Respect the will of the Guyanese people to choose their leader.”

The main party opposing Mr. Granger, the People’s Progressive Party, held a large lead in the national vote until the counting was suddenly halted in Georgetown the day after the election. The opposition leader, Bharrat Jagdeo, said the P.P.P. would boycott Parliament and lobby for international sanctions against the government if the electoral board refused to conduct a full recount.

“We won’t recognize the government,” Mr. Jagdeo said. “Guyana will become just like Venezuela,” he added, referring to the neighboring country convulsed by sanctions and political crisis.

The results declaration could spark a new wave of protests in opposition strongholds across Guyana’s sugar belt, which earlier this month led to one death. Political tensions in the country are fed by a historical ethnic rift, with Guyanese of African descent supporting the government and ethnic Indians favoring the opposition.

Each side is afraid the opposing party will exclude it from the oil riches and use proceeds from crude exports to cement its political power for decades.

The promise of oil riches has raised the cost of losing political power in Guyana, convincing Mr. Granger to push ahead with the marred electoral process despite mounting international pressure, said Diego Moya-Ocampos, a political risk analyst at IHS Markit in London.

“They have clearly no intention to come up with a different result,” he said, referring to the ruling party. “They are pushing forward, and there’s no way back.”

The political crisis puts the spotlight on America’s largest oil company, Exxon Mobil, which has spearheaded the development of Guyana’s oil industry.

The company is planning to ramp up Guyana’s oil production to 750,000 barrels per day by 2025, overtaking the current output of the crumbling oil giant Venezuela. These plans, however, could be derailed by Guyana’s political paralysis.

“This crisis will have serious implications for the oil companies,” said Mr. Jagdeo, the opposition leader. He said his party will lobby Western government to halt the flow of Guyana’s oil revenues, adding that “it will be tantamount to supporting an illegal regime.”

Exxon declined to comment.

Denis Chabrol contributed reporting from Georgetown, Guyana.